

BROOKLYN NEWS

UPLIFTING YOGA — FOR ALL!

BY ALISSA AMBROSE
NY CITY NEWS SERVICE

BEFORE STARTING their stretches and poses, each student in Third Root Community Health Center's small yoga studio in Flatbush took turns saying their name.

Some were newcomers and others already knew each other well, but everyone participated in the weekly ritual.

These greetings are part of what make Betsy Shapiro a regular who is loyal to Third Root.

"In other classes," she said, "you are one of many."

"You don't have to worry about other people's perceptions of you or one's understanding," said Shapiro of the wellness center, which also offers classes to members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender community.

"The other students care about one another and [the instructor] cares."

The goal at Third Root isn't just stronger arms or perfect poses. Creating a safe, welcoming atmosphere for every student is equally important, said instructor Jacoby Ballard.

A small group of health practitioners and teachers co-own and run Third Root, which opened in 2008.

Their studio on Marlborough Road is easy to miss. But inside, the small lobby is an oasis of natural light and potted plants.

Posters for community events, health workshops, and even a course on "happiness," are taped to the walls.

Medicinal herbs, used for classes on natural medicine, fill planters out front.

Instructors draw from their personal experiences.

In college, Ballard was a self-described jock, but after enrolling in a yoga course to fulfill a physical education credit, he says his entire lifestyle changed.

He started practicing regularly, became a vegetarian, and by 2004, was a certified yoga instructor, he said.

In co-founding Third Root, Ballard hoped to create a space where anyone could connect on or off the mats.

"I have personally felt unwelcome in some yoga classes because they will say 'if you're a woman do this, if your a man do this' and so those of us that are in between that spectrum I don't really know what to do," Ballard said.

Third Root class offerings have includ-



Third Root Community Health Center is more than a place for a good stretch. It offers a sense of community for those who felt uncomfortable elsewhere. Photo by Corey Sipkin/Daily News

ed queer/trans yoga, pre- and postnatal yoga, and yoga for people with "abundant" bodies or geared toward survivors of abuse.

Ballard believes the inclusive venture already is a success.

"I see people getting to know their neighbors as more and more people

come into classes together," he said. "[Third Root] is definitely building community around here."

Third Root Community Health Center is located at 380 Marlborough Road. Yoga classes cost \$12 for a drop-in, \$100 for 10; \$180 for 20.

For more information go to thirdroot.org or call (718) 940-9343.

The bing is the thing for pinball king

BY AL BARBARINO
DAILY NEWS WRITER

HE'S A PINBALL wizard.

Windsor Terrace's Francesco La Rocca is living his childhood dream, keeping pinball alive as he climbs the World Pinball Player Rankings.

La Rocca, 45, a former restaurant manager, is ranked 254th in the world — up from 435th last month and 2,061st last year — after winning a major tournament in Seattle in June.

Next up is the Professional and Amateur Pinball Association championship next month in Pittsburgh — widely regarded as the super bowl of pinball — with a chance to win a top prize of \$39,000.

"My goal is to . . . spread the word about pinball," said La Rocca. "I like pinball because each machine reminds me of something. Even the oldest machine is related to some kind of show or movie or something you grew up with."

As a young man, La Rocca spent his summers working in arcades scattered throughout Palermo, Sicily, honing his pinball skills. But not long after he moved to New York in 1996, The Arcade on Broadway, his pinball stomping ground here, was shut down. That led to a 14-year hiatus from the game.

"I didn't see any more pinball — nothing, zero. It was sad," he said. "I stopped looking."

The dream was reborn when La Rocca heard about the NYC Pinball League from a friend last year and competed in March and May 2010 to work off some rust — and relive some memories.

In April 2010 he played in his first professional tournament. And in April of this year, he started his own league, the Brooklyn Pingolf League, which he runs from Fratelli Brick Pizza Joint on Grand St. in Williamsburg.

"When he's playing during tournaments he's like a tyrant," said Eddie Cramer, 48, a fellow pinballer from Brooklyn Heights. "But outside of it he's got the biggest heart."

Kris Medina, 41, a pinballer from Woodside, Queens, said La Rocca runs the league 10 to 12 hours a day during tournaments to attract more players.

"His passion for pinball is hard to match," he said.



Francesco La Rocca.